

Reminiscences of an Old Violin Maker

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Beliefs and Customs - Life histories

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Title Reminiscences of an old violin maker

Place of origin Portland, Oregon Date 3/13/39

Project worker Sara B. Wrenn

Project editor

Remarks

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Sara B. Wrenn Date March 13, 1939

Address 505 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Reminiscences of an Old Violin Maker

Name and address of informant Robert Robinson 4405 E. Hawthorne Ave., Portland, Oregon

Date and time of interview Home of informant, above address

Place of interview

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

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Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Somewhat cluttered and over-furnished living-room, with archway between it and the dining-room. Dark woodwork. Old two-story, square-type house, in need of paint, with veranda along the front; only a few feet back from the busy thoroughfare of Hawthorne Avenue. The atmosphere was gloomy and sad, a fit setting for the sad old man — the informant.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

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Name and address of informant Robert Robinson 4405 E. Hawthorne Ave., Portland, Oregon

Information obtained should supply the following facts.

1. Ancestry

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2. Place and date of birth

3. Family

4. Places lived in, with dates

5. Education, with dates

6. Occupation and accomplishments with dates

7. Special Beliefs and interest

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

10. Other points gained in interview

1. Father, Stock chiefly Scotch, Robt. E. Robinson; Mother, Fannie C. Hudson Robinson descendant, Henry Hudson family

2. Ohio, 1850

3. Widower. Five children: Harry Raymond, Robert E., Herbert B., Blanche M., and Mrs. Edna A. Bates.

4. Lived in Oregon since 1897. Prior to that date, Washington, D. C., New York, and pretty well over the United States.

5. Educated chiefly in Des Moines, Iowa. Naturally musical; musical education picked up here, there and everywhere.

6. Some mechanical engineering, but chiefly music. Once lead orchestra.

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7. Associated with music and violin-making for almost 73 years.
8. No community nor religious activities, except in orchestral work of past.
9. Stooped, smooth-faced, with mane of white hair. Sensitive face and hands, with a faint resemblance to the great Paderweski.
10. A very sad old man, sorrowing for his "old mate" who died two years ago.

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

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Name and address of informant Robert Robinson 4405 Hawthorns Ave., S.E. Portland Oregon

Text: I'm afraid I can't tell you very much. While I have been a musician all my life, I came to Portland first in connection with the installation of the garbage crematorium, down on Giles Lake. That's a long way from the music world, isn't it? Later, I helped install the Bybee Avenue crematorium at Sellwood. You ask if I recall anything of special interest in connection with the early cremations here. Yes, there was something rather curious and

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strange in the very first cremation we had. He was an old lawyer of Eastern Oregon. He had made known his desire to be cremated, and two staunch friends were called in, to whom he said: 'I have been notified by the spirit world that I am to pass away soon, and I would like you boys to take charge. They are building a crematorium down at Portland, and if it is finished I wish you would see that my body is cremated there as early as possible, as I want to begin my services in the next world with the least possible delay.' Just about this time a woman showed up, a spiritualist by the name of Ladd. I think she was connected with the old banking family. (The interviewer remembers faintly something of a fortune-teller of this name, but is convinced she was no relative to the banking family, unless very distant.) This woman held seances and was quite important in the spiritualist circle of that time. She didn't know the man from Eastern Oregon, but in some way she had heard about him, and she claimed to have been notified by the spirits to officiate at his funeral. Well, strangely enough, the lawyer did pass away on the very date he had foretold to his friends. Oh yes, I remember, he said if the crematorium was too far from completion at his death, he wanted them to bury him under six feet of soil, placing his body in wet quicklime, with earth over it, so that it would be absolutely destroyed as quickly as possible, and then he could begin his services in the next world.

Well, the crematorium was nearing completion, so the body was placed in a vault by the man's friends, and as soon as we were ready we were to notify the lawyer's lodge and his friends and this Mrs. Ladd. All of which we did, and the cremation was to take place, but it wasn't very successful. There was a leakage in the air-valves somewhere, and the men made a bad job of it, and we had to postpone the cremation. Then one of the friends came to us and said: "Don't worry, I knew all this was going to happen. The old man rode down with me, and on the train he told me it wasn't going to succeed, but it will next time." Finally we got everything to working all right, and we sent word to the friends, and this time the cremation was successful. We sent word to that Mrs. Ladd the first time, along with the rest of them, but she didn't come. She said the spirits had told her not to come, but she was on hand at the second attempt, and everything passed off all right.

Yes, I've known all the musicians here in Portland at one time or another. Edgar Coursen was a great friend of mine. I've been mixed up in everything of a musical nature. I was the first to work out a radio program in Oregon. A Frenchman, LaPlatte, was the first one to play over the radio. He had been a dope fiend — not to be depended on, and he died about two years ago off in China 3 somewhere. His son, known as Platoff, is one of the solo dancers of the Ballet [?].

Yes, I've been quite a rambler, and I've known many of the masters from Kreisler down. Kreisler isn't simply a fiddler; he's a great musician and a great man. I knew him first when he was just a boy. I knew Joseph Hoffman too, and Jean [Giraldi?], the famous French [celloist?]. They have all come out here to see me. Giraldi was here six years ago. Musicians are great folks to get together and talk all night.

Early in my life I travelled out of New York. There were four of us — John Bunny, a representative from [Wagnalls?], Wally Reeves and myself. I led the orchestras. We'd go north in summer and south in the winter. Maurice Drew was with us part of the time, but he was a jealous sort of a fellow — hard to get along with. Being a [?], he felt superior and took himself very-seriously. John Bunny was just about the homeliest man I ever saw, but he was clever in his comedy work. I keep up a desultory correspondence with many of the old-timers. Do you remember Alfred Keller, who was a concert master in symphony here? He was what I would call a “natural,” I heard him first when he came to the old Russell building to take lessons. His “tone” impressed me tremendously. He would have made a great performer, but he gave it up to study law, and he's an attorney in San Francisco today; quite successful too, I hear. Oh yes, he's still interested in music, but not professionally.

I wonder if you remember Rigo, the gypsy fiddler, as he called himself? Oh you do? You remember how he used to play at the Louvre [restaurant?]. Whenever there was an

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attractive woman at a nearby table, he would fasten those bold eyes of his on her and play the [?]. That was just about all he could play, the old devil! That and three or four other selections. The Louvre was a great place in those days. It was located on Fourth and Alder, if I recall 4 correctly. That was about 1911 or [?]. Ah me, there have been a lot of changes since then! Poor old Rigo! It was in Portland he finally came to grief. He was a pervert, and the authorities finally got him on a charge of contributing to the delinquency of a youth. His last wife was here with him too; a big woman, who dressed in gaudy clothes. I don't know how many wives Rigo had. I don't think he married them; he just appropriated his wives. Well, he went to the county jail for his goings on here, and it cost him every cent he had, even to his violin, which after being peddled about, finally was sold for \$500. I think he died in Chicago two or three years ago.

You ask me about the making and repair of violins. That's been, I might say, my life work. We use the same wood now that the old masters did years and years ago: mountain maple for the back, ribs, neck and scroll; and spruce or pine for the top. No, we don't use any native woods. It all comes from Europe, mostly the [?], where families from generation to generation prepare the wood, and where the trees are, for some reason, replanted. What we got for the best violin production is guaranteed as 200 years old. Cat-gut, oh that's just say-so. What we use is sheep gut, from the hardy northern sheep, and for stringing the bow we use horse tail hair. It comes mostly from France, Arabia and Russia. Sometimes it's bleached, but the best is from sturdy white animals.

Yes, I've known them all, but the world seems lacking in music these days. A great satisfaction that I have is my work in originating the Junior Symphony Orchestral Society for the young people. It is well established now, with a hundred members, and [Gerskovitah?] is a fine leader. Charles Berg and Julius Meier were of great help in the organization.

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Form D

Extra Comment

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Comment:

Mr. Robinson could, the interviewer, thinks, give much more from out his musical past, but he is not well, and seems depressed. As he expressed it, "I've never been a very humorous person." However, he warmed up a little toward the end of the interview, giving the interviewer a cordial invitation to come and see him again, when he might have more information to convey.